

Disposal Recommendations for Indiana Residents on Proper Disposal of Home-Generated Needles/Sharps

In 2006, The Diabetes Advisory Group created a Syringe Disposal Task Force consisting of a group of people from a variety of public and private interests, including representatives from local health departments, solid waste management districts, pharmaceutical companies, and others. The purpose of the Task Force is to educate and initiate awareness about the importance of proper syringe/sharps disposal among the citizens of the State of Indiana. The goal of the Task Force was to create guidelines for Indiana residents to follow, since no laws exist in Indiana that regulates the disposal of home-generated syringes/sharps. These guidelines will be posted on the Indiana State Diabetes Prevention and Control Program's website.

An estimated 8 to 9 million people in the United States use syringes outside of the healthcare setting, disposing at least 3 billion syringes a year. About 2 billion of these injections are administered by people who have diabetes and patients receiving home health care.¹ Approximately 1 billion are attributed to injection drug users. Most of the sharps used for these injections wind up discarded in everyday household trash and community solid waste, putting workers and the public at risk of needle stick injuries, and possibly life threatening infections.²

If a needle stick injury occurs, the expenses of providing post-injury counseling and prevention measures are costly. Risks associated with unsafely discarded sharps include needle stick injuries and potential fatal blood borne infections, such as HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C.³ In very rare cases tetanus, syphilis, tuberculosis, herpes, and diphtheria have been transmitted through needle stick injuries. To prevent such injuries outside of health care facilities, disposal methods for home-generated sharps need to be dramatically improved and encouraged, and the public needs to be educated on the issue and provided with effective solutions.⁴

Unfortunately, the options for safe syringe and sharps disposal in the community are often limited and poorly misunderstood. Laws and regulations governing medical waste (including needles and sharps) were made for health care facilities and medical waste operations. These laws and regulations can hinder community efforts to gather and consolidate household sharps for safe disposal of medical waste.⁵

Most people who give themselves injections have received very little and sometimes contradictory guidance about safe disposal of used sharps. Some medical experts are even uncertain of what to advise to patients. For illegal drug users, the criminal penalties for syringe possession are strong disincentives to safe disposal of their used syringes.

¹ *The Diabetes Monitor: At-Home Safe Needle Disposal.* <http://www.diabetesmonitor.com/b354.htm>.

² *Safe Needle Disposal.* <http://www.safeneedledisposal.org>.

³ *Preventing Needlestick Injuries.* <http://www.dentalindia.com/needle.html>.

⁴ *Stop Needlestick Injuries.* <http://www.lhmu.org.au/ambulance/ohs/needles.html>.

⁵ *Safe Community Syringe Disposal: Understanding the Barriers and Creating Solutions.* Report presented to the Council on Scientific Affairs at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Medical Association.

Many illegal drug users do not participate in safe disposal for fear of arrest for possession of drug paraphernalia.⁵

Dramatic reduction or elimination of needles and other sharps from community solid waste would be the most effective approach to protect workers. Solutions are needed to eliminate needles from community solid waste. While these solutions are being developed, there is still a dire need for safe disposal guidelines for people who continue to discard used sharps in common household trash.

Indiana Guidelines

Currently, the State of Indiana does not have guidelines dedicated to the issue of proper disposal for home-generated sharps. Each of the 92 counties within the State follow their own guidelines, whether it be federal guidelines (such as from the Environmental Protection Agency)^{6,7} guidelines which the county itself created, or no guidelines exist because they never have been discussed or considered. The variation among counties is why there is often confusion among Indiana residents of what should be done with used syringes and sharps.

State, county, and city ordinances regulate disposal of sharps in residential settings. Local or State ordinances take precedence over federal guidelines, and can specify the type of container, disposal program, destruction of needle, and/or prohibit disposal of sharps in the common trash.

To clarify any confusion that exists, residents should encourage their local officials and legislators to author and/or support legislation regarding the proper disposal of home-generated sharps in Indiana. However, since no current State legislation exists, the Indiana State Department of Health Diabetes Prevention and Control Program, the Indiana State Diabetes Advisory Council, and other supporting agencies suggest the following disposal methods in order to reach the primary goal of preventing sharps from entering the household waste stream:

If available in your community:

- **Drop-off collection sites:** Sharps users can take their filled sharps container to appropriate collection sites, which may include doctors' offices, hospitals, health clinics, pharmacies, health departments, community organizations, police and fire stations, and medical waste facilities. These programs may distribute appropriate sharps containers or give self-injectors the option of continuing to use empty household containers to collect sharps.⁶
- **Household hazardous waste collection sites:** Self-injectors can place their used sharps in a special sharps container, or in some cases, an approved household

⁶ *Protect Yourself, Protect Others: Safe Options for Home Needle Disposal*. United States Environmental Protection Agency. <http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/other/medical/med-home.pdf>.

⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. http://www.cdc.gov/idu/facts/AED_IDU_DIS.pdf.

container, then take them to municipal household hazardous waste collection sites and place them in the sharps collection bins.⁶

- **Residential special waste pickup services:** Self-injectors can place their used sharps in a special container, similar to a recycling container, and put it outside their home for collection by trained special waste handlers. Some programs require customers to call for pickup, while others offer regular pickup schedules.⁶
- **Mail-back programs:** Used sharps are placed in special containers, which are mailed (in accordance with the U.S. Postal Service requirements) to a collection site for proper disposal. Mail-back programs are available for individual use by sharps users, and can also serve as a disposal method for community collection sites. These programs work well for rural communities, communities that don't already have a medical waste pickup service, and individuals who wish to protect their privacy.⁶
- **Syringe exchange programs:** Sharps users can exchange their used needles for new needles. Exchange programs are usually operated by community organizations, which properly dispose of the used needles collected at exchange sites.⁶
- **Home needle destruction devices:** A variety of products are available that clip, melt, or burn the needle and allow the sharps user to throw the syringe or plunger in the garbage. The devices can reduce or eliminate the danger of sharps entering the waste stream.⁶

If none of these options are available in the community, a last resort is to dispose of the used syringes/sharps in a heavy duty plastic bottle such as a laundry detergent bottle and tape the lid shut. (Do not use coffee cans – they are not puncture resistant) On the outside of the bottle, where it can be easily seen, write “WARNING: SYRINGES - DO NOT RECYCLE” on the outside and then place in the household trash.

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